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Spot lie detector tests weighed by Army chief

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WASHINGTON — The chief of staff of the Army believes spot lie detector tests for people holding sensitive U.S. secrets may be necessary to help guard against the determined efforts of Soviet spies.

"I believe that moving in the direction of random, unannounced polygraphing might be a deterrent," Gen. John Wickham said in an interview. "I think it can be a screening kind of polygraph where you're asked only a couple of questions [such as], 'Are you in contact or have you ever been in contact with a foreign government concerning material that you handle?' "

General Wickham's comments came as the government looked for improvements in security of classified information in the wake of disclosure of the so-called Walker spy ring, whose members allegedly sold secrets to the Soviet Union for nearly two decades.

The Defense Department has been conducting limited polygraph tests in security matters under a recent, experimental grant of authority by Congress.

The CIA and the National Security Agency, the nation's chief electronic eavesdropping operation, make extensive use of lie detectors.

A spokesman for the Navy, prime target of the alleged Walker ring, said the service uses polygraph tests for screening and some "periodic reassessment" of persons privy to the service's most sensitive secrets.

General Wickham said he envisioned use of random polygraph tests for those persons with access to what is called special compartmented information, that is, material that requires additional, special controls beyond classification as top secret.

"You wouldn't just throw the guy out with one [polygraph] blip," he said. "You would have to do more research."

General Wickham said he anticipated more losses to espionage, "given the efforts that the Soviets and our enemies are willing to make and the resources they are willing to spend and the frailties of human beings."

An authoritative Navy source said Navy Secretary John F. Lehman, Jr., and the chief of naval operations, Adm. James D. Watkins, were expected to issue directives soon to limit damage from lost secrets by changing procedures, tightening up on the handling of secret material aboard ships, establishing alert systems against "spies in camp" and reducing the numbers with access to classified material.

The aim is to cut in half the number of naval personnel with such access. Naval intelligence sources said about 75 percent of the 575,000 men and women in the service had some kind of security clearance. Cutting that number won't be easy because, for example, modern ships are loaded with secret equipment.

"It's hard to be in a sophisticated military environment and not have a security clearance," an intelligence source said.

Authorities also cautioned that the rigorous new methods envisioned would not necessarily guard against a Walker case. Only Barbara Joy Crowley Walker's whistle-blowing on her former husband brought the case to light and resulted in his May 20 arrest, it was noted.

They said Navy performance reports had been good regarding John A. Walker, Jr., and those later arrested — his son, Michael, a Navy enlisted men; his brother, Arthur, a former lieutenant commander, and Jerry A. Whitworth, a former communications specialist. No inklings of their alleged spying showed up in the form of unusual behavior, changed life styles or other aspects.

General Wickham said the Army, too, was tightening its need-to-know procedures under which individuals are given only as much classified information as they need to do their jobs even though their level of clearance might nominally entitle them to see a wider range of information.

The Army also has developed a special unit within its inspector general's office to check on the security practices, among other things, of its most hush-hush projects, called "black" programs in security jargon.

According to FBI estimates, approximately 30 percent of the nearly 2,600 officials from Soviet bloc countries and Cuba stationed in this country are known to be or suspected "of working actively in the United States for their country's intelligence services."

There are some restrictions on travel by Soviet officials in this country. About 20 percent of the country is off-limits to them, including some but not all areas where there are military installations. Baltimore is an "open city." Travel by officials of other Soviet bloc countries is not similarly restricted.

The Defense Intelligence Agency, a separate operation within the Defense Department, does not have as free a hand to use the polygraph as the CIA. Under the recent grant of authority from Congress, the DIA is able to administer lie detector tests to those who "occupy critical intelligence positions."

The DIA has complained that although this is a step forward, recent espionage history suggests that hostile intelligence services expend considerable effort in attempts to recruit fully cleared personnel who have extensive classified access but who occupy lower-paying positions.

Such individuals, often administrative personnel, would not necessarily be included in a definition of "critical intelligence" duties.

The key figure in one of the nation's most notorious spy cases, Christopher J. Boyce, who stole secrets from his defense contractor employer for the Soviet Union, has attested to the deterrent power of the lie detector.

Boyce, who was half of the "Falcon and the Snowman" spy operation, is now serving a 40-year sentence. He told a Senate committee in April that "a policy of limited polygraph examinations at the time of termination of employment on the question of unauthorized disclosure should be implemented."

If such a policy had been in effect when he was stealing secrets, "I would never have considered an act of espionage," he said, because he was convinced he would have been found out despite the assurances of his Russian handlers that the machines could be beaten.

Use of the polygraph has been controversial for its intrusive nature and its potential for error.

Washington Bureau correspondent Charles W. Corddry contributed to this article.